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'From the penthouse to the shithouse': a social constructionism investigation of Rugby League players' experiences of transitioning to retirement

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ABSTRACT

The transition to retirement out of elite sport is complex with many ongoing transitions across an athlete's career impacting the outcome. This qualitative study investigated transition experiences of 21 male Australian professional National Rugby League (NRL) players to provide insight into the challenges they faced during and after their professional playing career and to understand what resources are needed to support them. Due to the potential for unpredictability of timing of retirement from elite sport, it was found that transitioning was an ongoing series of transitions, and the concept of 'transitions' encompassed elements of participant's playing career, perceived need for and access to preparation for retirement and career development, the transitioning into retirement process and beyond. It was found that players' transitions into and out of a professional sporting career were impacted by the social construction and perceived expectations of life as a past and present professional athlete.

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Elite sport; transition; retirement; Rugby League; social constructionism

Introduction

Retirement from elite sport, also referred to as the transition out of sport, is an area of research interest that provides a unique perspective on the many complex interactions impacting the retirement process, and on the many transitioning events within that process (Stambulova et al., 2021; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Athletes rarely contemplate retirement, believing they will be able to make a long and successful career from sport (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2021). Previous research exploring the experiences of transitioning to retirement in elite athletes has found that many do not identify any urgency in preparing for their life or alternative (non-sporting) career past their sporting career, leaving them unprepared and vulnerable when the time comes (Agnew et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2018; Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Knights et al., 2019).

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Over time, the athlete may develop an encompassing identity based on their sporting career, talent and achievements, which may or may not resonate with post sport career opportunities and impede their preparedness for life after sport (Cosh et al., 2021). While playing sport, many athletes find it difficult to balance the expectations of professional sport with education and career development for the unknown outcome and timeframe of retirement (Stambulova et al., 2021).

Retirement from elite sport is correlated by two distinct transition stages: the normative (predictable) stage, where the athlete has the opportunity to plan for retirement and it is an expected natural transition to another life stage: or the non-normative (unpredictable) stage where the athlete has no control over timing of retirement or predication of what comes next in the life stage (Stambulova, 2010). A lack of control over the timing of retirement may lead to feelings of vulnerability, failure, humiliation, identity loss (Agnew et al., 2018; Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007), and psychological distress (Mannes et al., 2019). However, even those who have control over their retirement may later experience difficulties and challenges. Voorheis et al. (2023) for example, found that among the challenges faced by retired athletes, were body dissatisfaction, feelings of loss and grief, joint pain, sleep issues and stress, and difficulty establishing a new routine for their life. In addition, Hind et al. (2020) found that there is continued impact of sport related injuries for Rugby Union and Rugby League players into their retirement. With particular regard to concussion, Hind et al. (2022) detailed an association between a high number of concussions during playing careers and poor mental health and sleep outcomes in Rugby code players.

For the athlete, retirement is a time of physical, emotional, lifestyle and environmental change (Knights et al., 2019; Mannes et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2021). The level of preparedness of the player and support provided influences the ability to adapt to these changes. It has been observed that athletes' overall well-being is often well supported while they are playing sport and perceived as valuable to the sport and the club; however, once retired from the sport responsibility shifts and support becomes something that the athlete must seek out independently (Agnew et al., 2018; Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Knights et al., 2019).

Football codes, which are soccer, rugby, and Australian football, are part of the 'global sports entertainment industry' resulting in participants becoming 'more than *mere* footballers' (Kelly & Hickey, 2010, p.28) due to commodification of the sport and its players. The highly competitive and physical nature of these sports brings significant media and spectator interest and financial rewards, which creates a particular sporting identity, including but also beyond physical competence and skill (Kelly & Hickey, 2010). As this identity is associated with the sport and the professional athlete undertaking that sport as a career, once that career has ended that identity may have a negative impact on career transition (Brown et al., 2018; Knights et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2021).

There is the potential for a high level of insecurity for a long-term career in high impact sports such as the football codes where injury can limit longevity, and careers can end at short notice (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021). The extent of injury may determine whether retirement from sport at the professional level is voluntary or involuntary, and the degree of player involvement in the decision (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021; Park et al., 2013). For some players, while injury is the impetus for retirement, the outcome may be seen as a relief, taking away the need to perform at a high level (Jones & Denison, 2017).

Provision of social and structural support (Knights et al., 2019) is vital for retiring elite athletes, and where support is accessible throughout the playing career as well as on retirement the transition out of elite sport and into the next stage of life has been more positive (Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2021). Support needs to encompass a range of areas including post-sport career development, educational attainment to support employability, financial guidance and navigating prospective change in identity once removed from the sporting environment (Brown et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2021). Career assistance programs to help athletes move beyond sport and prepare for retirement have been in existence for the past 20 years (Stambulova et al., 2009). For example, in Canada, the Game Plan program is a holistic program that aims to develop the skills and networks of the athlete and equip them with the ability to focus on health, education and career opportunities both during sport and in life beyond sport (Game Plan, 2025). Similarly, the Athlete365 Career+ program (International Olympic Committee, 2025) aims to assist athletes during all stages of their careers to prepare for life beyond sport. In the United Kingdom, Rugby League Cares (Rugby League Cares, 2025) provides education and training support specifically to those involved in Rugby. Stambulova et al. (2007) argued that it is not by chance that career assistance programs have been initiated in the UK, The Netherlands, Australia, the USA, and Canada. However, while these programs offer preventative strategies and are offered from mid-career onwards, athletes at this stage of their career are not necessarily thinking about life after sport. Particularly in Australia, there is evidence of poor uptake of services among athletes (Smith & McManus, 2009; Agnew et al., 2018) which may limit their effectiveness. The poor uptake of support services during careers is despite research in Rugby League (Lavalley, 2019) asserting that pre-retirement planning may assist performance during careers. Reasons for not accessing services include that some players see the support as not meeting their needs adequately, and others may perceive a sense of stigma attached in needing to ask for support (Brown et al., 2018; Mannes et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013). Where there is a sense of trust and a close relationship between the athlete and the provider of support, support is more likely to be sought and accepted (Brown et al., 2018). Those closest to the player throughout their playing career, such as coaches, club management, and sporting organisations and players associations, thus have both opportunity and responsibility to provide services and encourage their uptake to support preparedness and preparation for retirement from elite sport (Knights et al., 2019).

Preparedness for retirement and negotiating the challenges and expectations of life beyond elite sport will depend on a range of factors, and the process needs to take place across the lifespan of the athletes' career and beyond (Agnew et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2018; Knights et al., 2019; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Nevertheless, despite an increase in retirement research in past decades, professional sports people still experience significant difficulties in retirement (Cosh et al., 2021). This remains an important area of investigation as professional sporting bodies attempt to create supportive and caring environments for players (Stambulova et al., 2021). There is limited literature on retirement from Rugby League in Australia, (Buckland et al., 2019; Iverson et al., 2021; Knights et al., 2019; Lakisa et al., 2019; Lavalley, 2019; Pearce et al., 2018; Van Patten et al., 2021), thus the experiences of the players remain largely

unknown. Of the research that does exist, Knights et al. (2019) investigated the retirement experiences of three football codes: Rugby League, Soccer and Australian Football and found that the transition out of sport can be shaped by the support received from the sports organisation, the planning and preparation the player has done prior to retirement, and the positive influences on the transition. Lakisa et al., (2019) investigated the experiences of Pasifika players who had migrated to Australia. Whilst the participants in Lakisa et al.'s study were retired this study was focused on their playing experiences, not their retirement transition experiences which is the focus of the current study. Buckland et al. (2019) acknowledged the first reported cases of chronic trauma encephalopathy in former Rugby League players in a letter to the editor and Pearce et al., (2018) highlighted that retired NRL players had considerable cognitive and motor issues compared to those who had not played contact sports. Iverson et al., (2021) found that depression in former NRL players was likely linked to anxiety, stress, lack of resilience and the impact on life of chronic pain and Van Patten et al. (2021) linked depression in NRL players to cognitive decline in retirement. The current research sought to investigate the whole transition experience, rather than pain and injury or mental health consequences alone, thus has an important contribution to the sociology of sport field of literature in addition to policy and practice considerations. Specifically, this research contributes to the ongoing sociological conversation regarding athlete retirement, identity and post-sport experiences.

The current study contemplated the transitioning to retirement experiences using a social construction perspective (Patton, 2002; Gergen & Gergen, 2003) of Australian Rugby League players. This theoretical lens was adopted as it recognises the importance in considering the athlete's career trajectory and associated personal and professional transition experiences and what could be done to make the transition processes as uncomplicated as possible through supporting player wellbeing prior to and during the process. The study was supported by the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) and the associated Rugby League Players Association (RLPA), who actively sought this research as a means to explore player experiences in order to further develop resources and support that meet player needs. This research finds its significance in addressing current industry needs and preparedness to create change.

The aims of this study were to investigate retirement transition experiences of elite male Australian NRL players; provide insight into challenges faced during the transition into retirement from NRL and to understand what resources are needed to support NRL players throughout the lifespan of their career and beyond to enable positive retirement from elite sport.

Method

Research design

In order to elicit in-depth and meaningful representations and perceptions of experiences of retired professional Rugby League players in the context of a specific environment and circumstances (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) and across the lifespan of their playing careers and beyond (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Smith & Sparkes, 2009) a qualitative inquiry through a social constructionism epistemology was utilised. This method of inquiry allowed

participants to openly tell their stories of the culture, and social and emotional complexities (Patton, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) that constructed their life as an elite athlete in addition to their transition into, through and out of elite sport.

Social constructionism, as a social ontology, considers reality and meaning as subjective and created through dynamic social interactions. Social constructionism aims to account for the ways in which phenomena (like player transition to retirement) are socially constructed. Ontologically, social constructionism considers reality subjectively, which means it can be studied from the viewpoint of objective epistemology (Sagvaag & Barbosa da, 2021). This paper comes from a point of critical constructionism which asserts that knowledge is time and culturally positioned therefore reflects the interaction between culture, institutional and historical contexts (Manning, 2021n.d.). In addition, this paper adopts Searle's (1995) distinction between 'brute facts' that can exist independently of human existence, knowledge and perception and 'mental facts' which cannot exist without human beings. Searle (1995) asserted that there are three types of mental facts: purely mental facts which includes our subjective experience of phenomena - in this case retirement from elite sport; social facts which include friendship and custom and institutional facts which includes money, language and leadership (Searle, 1995; Sagvaag & Barbosa da, 2021). According to social constructionism, the experience of NRL footballers through the retirement process is a negotiation between the broader sporting context and the individual's acceptance of and participation in the process of negotiating retirement.

Ethics

Ethics was granted at an institutional level from the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee; approval number: 2357. The study was also formally supported by the NRL and RLPA. Participants were provided with information about the research and its purpose prior to the interview, and verbal consent to participate and have the interview recorded was given.

Recruitment and participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants (Patton, 2002). The NRL/RLPA had previously undertaken a mixed methods survey of past players to elicit information about their experiences with NRL/RLPA wellbeing and education programs. Participants had the option to agree to having contact details provided to the research team to be invited to a one-on-one interview. The participants were given an information sheet detailing the study and what the requirements of participation would entail. Participants were able to withdraw at any time. The information sheet also explained that neither the NRL nor the NRL Player's Association would know who had participated and any information that could potentially identify them would be omitted. The purpose of the interviews was to support the findings of the NRL/RLPA survey, and to explore in greater depth the experiences of players (Patton, 2002) during their career and in transitioning to retirement.

Forty-two participants agreed to be contacted, resulting in 21 interviews. Of the 21 participants, 10 had been retired from professional NRL six years or more (P1–10)

and 11 were in the transitioning phase of 1-5 years (P11–21). The length of time playing professional NRL ranged from three games to 14 years with the range of years since retirement 12 months – 20 years with an average of six years. Out of the 21 participants, 11 mainly retired due to injury, eight due to age, four due to the length of playing career, five due to losing passion for the game or enjoyment in playing, and three due to culminating in ‘the time being right’ to retire. Some participants retired due to their contracts not being renewed ($n=5$). Reasons given for non-renewal of contracts often were indicative of other identified reasons such as age, not playing up to the standard required for NRL level, or injury. Six participants considered their retirement out of their control, and 15 either had some or complete control over the timing of their transition out of sport.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to allow participants the opportunity to incorporate their own story into the responses while at the same time allowing the researcher to guide the interaction and direction of the question format (Patton, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). All of the interviews were conducted by the research assistant from October to December 2020. Questions covered a broad scope of athletes’ personal and professional life prior to, during and post professional playing career, exploring the barriers, facilitators and transition events encountered throughout those times. Interviews were conducted by phone or Skype. It is acknowledged that interviews conducted by phone or in an online context has some limitations. Firstly, online interviews require access to reliable technology and can present challenges to confidentiality if other people are present in the room the interviewer or interviewee are dialling in from (Krouwel et al., 2019; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Phone interviews do not allow non-verbal cues to be observed and have the same risk as online interviews of a non-participant being present in the room (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). However, telephone and Skype interviews were the most appropriate method as all participants were interstate or overseas. In addition, at the time interviews were undertaken Covid-19 restrictions were in place in Australia that limited face-to face opportunities as a means to protect the participant and interviewer. Interviews ranged in time between 35–75 minutes with an average interview time of 49 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded with participant consent and professionally transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The data was rich in text that portrayed the lived experience of participants; many of these experiences had common contexts and derived from similar exposure to events. The analysis in this project followed the Braun et al.’s (2016) model for effective qualitative research methodology and analysis that integrate the structured and blended steps of: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and producing the report. The researchers individually familiarised themselves with the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts while making notes on points of interest before formally

identifying codes in the data. The coded data was then organised into initial themes with the research team coming together to discuss and develop the themes and rename them where required (Braun et al., 2016). Through this process, codes were grouped together to create the themes and sub-themes. The final step in the process involved writing up the themes into a report (Braun et al., 2016) for the Australian National Rugby League.

Rigour

The essence of Tracy's (2010) criteria for methodological rigour are noted throughout the study's objectives (worthy topic; significant contribution), research methods (sincerity; credibility; ethics) and findings (rich rigour; meaningful coherence; resonance) (Tracy, 2010; Tracey & Heinrich, 2017). Tracy (2010) states worthy topics can arise from personal events. Retirement from sport is a deeply personal event and despite much research being conducted in this area, athletes continue to experience difficulties retiring from elite sports and decline to use existing services (Cosh et al., 2021). Thus, this topic is worthy because understanding the experiences of retirement from sport can lead to more appropriate services and support being provided to athletes, highlighting the relevance of the research (Tracy, 2010). The findings are presented as rich descriptions from participant voices which contributes to the rich rigour, credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Tracy, 2010). The project is sincere through having a transparent research process which utilises an audit trail regarding how the research was done (Tracy, 2010; Seale, 1999). We have also been transparent in the authoring of the paper, and through the acknowledgements of funding received (Tracy, 2010). Resonance can be achieved through the transferability of the findings as well as through evocative writing (Tracy, 2010). The participant voices in this research establish evocative research and the recommendations regarding retirement from elite sport can be applied to athletes from other sports who are also negotiating the retirement process, particularly athletes from team sports. Whilst the body of literature on retirement from sport is growing, there is little known about the experiences of Rugby League players in Australia and this research is practically significant for the Rugby League Players' Association who are able to act on the recommendations from this research to improve practices to support retiring Rugby League players. Procedural ethics has been achieved through receiving approval to conduct the research from the authors' institution. This research follows the Australian guidelines for the ethical practice of research with humans through voluntary participation, informed consent and the mitigation of any risks to participants. Finally, this research has achieved its purpose and has used appropriate theories and practices to establish meaningful coherence. We have situated our findings in the literature and presented conclusions that link to the stated purpose of our research (Tracy, 2010).

Smith and McGannon (2018) have critiqued the use of universal criteria to establish rigour in qualitative research because it leads to research being judged in pre-determined ways. However, those that critique universal criteria often offer alternative, flexible measures of quality (Tracy, 2010), thus criteria can be useful. Smith and McGannon (2018) acknowledge that if Tracy's (2010) eight criteria are to be used by researchers, then all eight criteria must be utilised because they have equal

importance. In addition, Smith and McGannon (2018) stress that along with the use of the eight criteria researchers must be clear about their epistemological and ontological approaches so that readers can appropriately determine the quality of the research. It is through Tracy's (2010) eight criteria and having a sound epistemological and ontological approach that we have sought to demonstrate the quality of this research.

Results and discussion

While considering transition to retirement experiences and how the rugby sporting culture may influence how NRL players make sense of their experiences, it was important to consider personal and professional impacts from participants' playing careers, and to what extent they were prepared for retirement. Furthermore, describing what could have been done to make that process as uncomplicated as possible in supporting player wellbeing prior to and during the process.

Results are presented within this framework as key concepts, incorporating relevant subthemes that support each concept.

Life trajectory of a professional NRL playing career

Career start

Through encouragement by family, young boys are socialised early in life to perceive sport as a natural activity they should want to participate in Agnew (2011). All participants had been playing NRL since childhood, and for many fathers as past players ($n=7$), and siblings ($n=5$) or close friends ($n=3$) playing NRL influenced their involvement which highlights the significance of the social interactions (or social facts as described by Searle, 1995) in constructing a reality for players which attributes significant meaning to Rugby in their lives. Progression to professional NRL occurred in mid to late teens; for many, reaching this stage of their playing experience fulfilled a childhood dream: 'it's stuff you dream about as a kid' (P2); and 'something that I wanted to do all my life' (P7).

Participants were asked to reflect on their first professional game and their associated feelings. Understandably, frequent responses included a mix of excitement ($n=11$) and nerves ($n=10$): 'a mixed bag of feelings' (P15). For some there was the sense of pride 'of the achievement of having made it to first grade' (P1), others were 'grateful and excited for the opportunity' (P18), and there was also anxiety in contemplating their future as a professional NRL player and its subsequent responsibilities:

A lot of pressure and I think ... anxiety, that you didn't want to be that person to stuff up because this is your chance to make an impact (P17).

These physical and emotional impacts of entering a professional playing career are representative of one of the first of many transitioning stages across the trajectory of the athlete's career (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). This is a time where the role of parent guiding the athlete's progression and environment shifts to the responsibility and influence of clubs, coaches and peers, making this an ideal

time to start preparing an athlete for the complexities of life as an elite athlete and beyond (Morris et al., 2017).

Playing career

It was clear that Rugby League was a significant factor in participant's lives by their language choices. When asked 'How important has Rugby League been in your life?' a resounding response was 'massive' ($n=9$); or 'extremely important' ($n=6$) or 'huge' ($n=2$). Many participants' experience of this phenomena (mental facts: Searle, 1995) included a constructed meaning which saw their playing career as a way of life rather than a job and appreciated the many resulting benefits:

It wasn't work it was just a way of life ... I loved it, I loved training, I loved the feeling of being so strong mentally and physically (P4).

Players felt 'valued' (P8) for their skills and contribution to the game and the opportunity to be paid for doing something they were passionate about:

I was very grateful for the fact that I got to do what I loved for a living ... you get to live out your childhood dream as an adult and get paid really well for it (P14).

Life as an NRL player provided many positive outcomes, including financial rewards, the camaraderie of team sport, or the development of transferable skills and ongoing opportunities:

I had no idea what was going to happen ... as an 18-year-old it's been the best thing for myself and my family, and the opportunities and the people we have met it's changed my life really (P5).

Challenges of playing professional NRL were also discussed and centred around the culture of a male dominated and highly paid elite sporting environment. Hickey and Kelly (2008, p. 479) blame the sporting industry for the 'construction of a contemporary football identity' as it 'generates a series of expectations about appropriate behaviours and dispositions.' This was also noted within the findings of this study. Many players enter professional NRL in their late teens, entering into an unnatural lifestyle for their age, encountering peer pressure, and sometimes without family support, especially where they have moved from home to play at the elite level. This time in young men's lives is a crucial time for the construction of identity (Arnett, 2000), meaning the influence of the sporting culture on behaviour is significant. Players can become active participants in the socialisation process as they progress through their careers, passing on what they have learnt to younger players, including potentially risky behaviours such as high alcohol consumption. Players as active participants in the social construction of the sporting culture is evident in this comment from one of the men:

It was a drinking sort of culture you're expected to train hard, play hard, but also drink hard: that's just the way it was ... then become the senior guy, you kind of lead in that way, that you've been learnt (P4).

With this influence on young men's identity construction, it is important to challenge the social and cultural expectations on athletes to behave in certain ways, to ensure

positive health behaviours are promoted. Being a player encompassed many, if not all, aspects of participant's lives, suggesting that players:

live within that bubble, that bubble that the professional game creates in that you can be quite shielded and isolated from what's happening in the community ... can create a different sense of reality (P2).

However, there was also the perception and expectation that there was a need for the game to encompass a player's life: to enable 'any kind of success, [a player] has to give it everything' (P12) with 'not a day that goes past that it's not a consideration' (P13), to ensure 'that you're hungry for it when you do perform when you get to game day' (P8).

It was totally all-encompassing ... you lived, breathed Rugby League, that was your job, they made it very well-known that that was your job, and you were totally consumed by the game (P17).

This left little opportunity for other pursuits, and lead to a self-centred way of life where 'everything else has to be second' (P5); 'if that's what you want to do then basically everything else gets put on the back foot'(P16).

You need to look after what you do, don't worry about what other people are doing just need to turn up at the game on the weekend being best prepared as you can ... that was the mindset, you just do what you need to do to be ready for the weekend and that was what was reinforced over time (P10).

Players accept the demands of the sport to prioritise it above other pursuits, and thus actively participate in the construction of the sports culture. Research with Australian footballers undertaken by Agnew (2011) found that the commitment to physical and skill development needed to maintain the performance level required for professional sport was intensive and consuming physically and emotionally.

For some participants there was a sense of loss caused by the extent that playing NRL impacted all aspects of their life. Social and family events were sacrificed due to playing or training commitments with an additional impact on what was considered 'normal' life transition or milestone events:

I missed lots of 18ths, 21st, engagement parties, weddings, you know birthdays through family and really good friends and they were always understanding because it was my job but it certainly had an impact on those things in my life (P15).

This socialisation of players to put Rugby League first and other aspects of their lives second has the potential to negatively impact players upon retirement. However, while participants were accepting of the Rugby League culture and the need to prioritise sport first while they were playing, in negotiating the retirement process and reflecting on their careers, players recognised that the all-encompassing lifestyle needs to be challenged. Enabling more of a balance between sport and outside pursuits would construct a different reality for current players which may facilitate better preparedness for retirement.

Retirement from elite sport

Participants' playing careers ended for a range of reasons, and as with their career beginning, it was an emotionally complex time, described as the realisation that the last game was like 'closing that chapter of your life' (P2); 'after living my dream playing my first NRL game to being washed up out the back door by the age of 23' (P7).

As soon as the final hooter went, I was probably a bit stunned and maybe a little bit, I felt a little bit empty that oh wait, that's it, it's all over ... like the final hooter actually sounded that was it for NRL (P14).

Some participants embraced the end of their sporting career as a new beginning: 'excited to be looking for life after footy' (P4), many named a sense of relief:

Knowing that I never had to play again, I never had to perform again, people could say whatever they wanted, and it wouldn't bother me ... didn't have to fight over another contract, didn't have to worry about that constant pressure of anxiety in performance (P17).

Interestingly, both participants (P4 and P17) perceived that they had no control of the timing of their retirement yet were still accepting of the process of retirement. Past research has suggested that athletes who have little control over the timing of retirement have been shown to face more difficult transitions (Agnew et al., 2018; Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Mannes et al., 2019), however, as evidenced in this research for some, the negotiation of the broader sporting context which can force the end of careers, and acceptance of the retirement can be seen as a positive experience.

Retirement from elite sport is impacted by a range of causes individually or collectively which may affect the decision to retire whether that be voluntarily, planned or forced (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Park et al., 2013). This was the case for participants in this study, most participants had multiple reasons for retiring including, injury ($n=11$), age ($n=8$) and length of playing career ($n=4$), with others having lost the passion for the game or enjoyment in playing ($n=5$), culminating in 'the time being right' to retire ($n=3$). Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) note that as an athlete progresses through their playing career, they recognise that their ability to continue at the level required will diminish. Some participants retired due to their contracts not being renewed ($n=5$). Reasons given for non-renewal of contracts often were indicative of other identified reasons such as age, not playing up to the standard required for NRL level. or injury.

For some participants retirement from NRL was a positive move forward and they accepted that retirement was inevitable, albeit unpredictable, in elite sport, although it was difficult to remove emotion from the experience.

An emotional time, I finished my last game and bang it's all over and you've got to get on with your next phase of your life ... it was good and bad, it was time to move on (P9).

However, for many there was a level of apprehension of what the future might entail and how that would compare/contrast to life as an NRL player or what their purpose would be in a new life stage.

Understanding a bit of purpose with what I was going to do for the rest of my life ... there were some sort of natural occurrences there that you are just trying to work out your place in the world (P10).

The early stages of retirement presented much sense of loss for many participants. Loss was noted in areas such as team environment (mates), routine and structure, lifestyle and income. Once the structure and social connections that embrace the elite sporting environment cease, athletes may be left feeling lonely and unsupported; they may struggle adapting to a new way of life without sport (Brown et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013). Participants in this study saw their playing career as 'regimented' (P10) where 'you knew where you were going, you knew what to do next' (P8). Part of the negotiation into retirement is the construction of a new structure or routine. Many of the participants in this study struggled with the changes in structure:

A lot of routine that was set for you as a player that you had to then redevelop or reintroduce into your life outside of football ... so a loss of process or loss of routine (P8).

Income from playing NRL was regular and depending on the contract often lucrative and supporting a good lifestyle. Change in income due to retirement and the ongoing responsibility of supporting family led to the need to 'go out and find work' (P6) when they were perhaps not prepared for a new career. Participants highlighted the unnatural developmental environment of players. They start playing NRL at a very young age and if successful in their playing career do not need to enter the (non-sport) workforce until much later than their peers, and as such miss out on career development and opportunities.

If you think about when most people start football, they're at high school, and when they come out, they're 30-year-old men, and all they've got in between is play football, ... living in the Rugby League world, it's not the normal way that people live or mature (P12).

Athletes may find transitioning from elite sport to a new working environment difficult due to having to start over in their professional development and status compared to workplace peers who may be younger but hold more seniority and adjusting to a lower comparable income level (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). In this sense, the workplace is not necessarily constructed in a way that is accepting of late starters who are changing careers. Career options may appear limited when retired athletes perceive themselves as too old to start an apprenticeship as their friends (non-sporting) have done and find difficulty in contemplating new career paths with lack of qualifications (Agnew, 2011; Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). In addition, the sports environment is a socially constructed reality that is significantly different from the traditional working environment and entering a subsequent career may require a reconstruction of reality for the athlete. According to social constructionism, mental facts includes one's subjective experience of the phenomena (Searle, 1995). In this research, the experience of retirement from sport was described as going 'from the Penthouse to the shithouse' (P6).

Identity

An important facet of transitioning into elite sport for the participants of this study was the development of an assumed identity. Participants identified how they felt

that their identity had been socially constructed by the culture of their sporting environment: 'Rugby League is an identity ... a professional Rugby League player is a certain identity' (P7); albeit 'a bit of a fake identity, it's an identity created by an environment' (P10); 'but it [identity] reinforced that you were someone because people knew who you were' (P19).

Most participants indicated that their NRL identity and profile stayed with them post their playing career which supports previous research that found footballers are 'always a footballer' (Agnew & Drummond, 2015). Some participants accepted this and the potential benefits that follow; however, some would have preferred to be accepted outside of their NRL identity.

I've been identified as Rugby League due to the fact that, that is all I've really done since I left school, I have been identified as rugby, a footy player sort of thing, I haven't been out there, I'm not a businessman or anything else ... I've been a football player (P11).

The culture, and physical and social environment of elite sport over time stimulates a specific athletic identity into which athletes are socialised. This may be difficult to maintain once removed from that environment (Brown et al., 2018) with 'little to support their sense of self' (Brown et al., 2018, p.76). Indeed, some participants struggled with their perception of identity once their playing career ended.

I didn't feel I had one [an identity] after Rugby League, I was trying to find myself ... Rugby League was my identity for a long time and took me quite a few years to create a new identity (P7).

Several participants commented on the adjustment needed to accept the reconstruction of identity and change in status once removed from the game: 'the biggest change was [...] being highly regarded at the international arena as an iconic figure in your country to just Joe normal' (P6). Some found this emotionally challenging: 'I went through a lot of emotions those few years; from somebody to nobody' (P7).

Cosh (2021) suggests that athletes will develop an identity that evolves over their sporting career from their perceived talent and achievements, and the environment that has been constructed for them while competing in a sport that attracts significant media and spectator attention (Hickey & Kelly 2008). This identity may not be of benefit to them in a non-sporting career; in fact, it may impede opportunities and future career opportunities (Cosh, 2021; Knights et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2021).

Preparation for retirement from sport

Participants accepted that retirement may have been smoother if they were more prepared, especially with the unpredictability of timing of retirement from elite sport: 'you think it's going to go forever' (P4). Participants also noted that preparation needed to be a consideration throughout the playing career; 'it's just as important as preparing yourself for training, and your games, and your Rugby League... it's just as important to have that Plan B' (P4).

Despite recognition of the importance of being prepared for retirement and a future career and employment, there were many participants, who while still playing did not recognise the importance of planning for post-retirement from the game and

did not have goals and plans in place. It was common for playing to be the sole focus: 'football's all I wanted to do, I wasn't thinking about after football, because that's where my head was at' (P1).

I saw the fact that if I was planning for life after footy, that somehow that would affect the way I played the game ... I didn't want to take that risk I sort of thought of it as a weakness that if I'm thinking about life after footy and sitting up at night studying well, I'm not getting my rest that I need to be good training the next day, or for my game (P4).

This resonates with other studies (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2021) where athletes believe that their sporting career will remain successful and ongoing. As such, retirement is not a priority or immediate consideration, leaving them unprepared and vulnerable when the time comes (Agnew et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2018; Hickey & Kelly, 2008).

Support needed for retirement from elite sport

Support was identified by participants as being needed in stages: prior to retirement (while still playing), transitioning to retirement (first 1–2 years), and beyond. Participants identified key support factors related to employability and dealing with the aftermath of injuries incurred while playing.

Employability

Participants suggested that preparation for employability post sporting career needed a stronger focus and priority throughout playing career as this was difficult to pick up later in life: 'getting ahead of that and trying to get people to think about it before it's right at the end, is probably a key' (P4).

Playing professionally for so long you miss out on the career development, you're not out there working, you're not advancing your skills in any way because obviously you've got to play football full-time ... all my mates were fully qualified tradesmen, and I didn't get that (P16).

The creation of a culture that facilitates preparation for life after sports requires a reconstruction of the sporting context which currently socialises players to put Rugby League first. As part of the construction of their social reality, players must be accepting of this requirement to put Rugby League first. Career preparation included as part of the training regime was suggested as an option that could be adapted across the player's career transition, although limitations were identified:

So I feel like you can, you can almost make it mandatory in some way, to do a few things when they're young ... but I think you'd really struggle to, to find kids that will put their hand up and go, yeah let me to do this for a week; your next age group, if it's more optional, probably would find a few more people and then towards the backend of people's career, I think you'd find more people (P11).

As did Stambulova et al. (2021), this study found that the performance focus of elite sport many elite athletes find it challenging when attempting to adhere to the expectations of professional sport while contemplating education or non-sport career development.

I tried to study while I was playing Rugby League, but to be honest it's very hard to put everything into Rugby League, because you have to be a hundred percent invested in Rugby League ... that's the hardest bit about trying to juggle 2 acts, trying to study what you want to do later on in life (P20).

Injuries

With NRL being a high impact sport injuries throughout the playing career are inevitable but unpredictable (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Injuries have the potential to end or interrupt a professional sporting career (Gledhill & Forsdyke, 2021). However, the consequences of those injuries did not cease once the playing career ended. Necessary ongoing medical support comes with a financial and emotional cost. Players were supported while still employed by a club: 'when you're a player you get access to the best doctors, you get rushed into hospital you get surgery by the best surgeons' (P6), but once that contract ceased so did the support:

There's a definite benefit being in the system as a young bloke, but then when you move out of that system you go to the doctors and you're in a queue if you haven't got private health insurance, you're waiting like everybody else ... now your body's in a shitload worse state than most people, so you know it's again that Penthouse to shithouse (P6).

Because the long-lasting consequences of injuries were incurred as a result of playing professional NRL as a career, participants thought that support in dealing with injuries should continue past the playing career: 'I think there should be a duty of care with player welfare, as in injury management ... you carry this [injury] with you for the rest of your life ... was it really worth it?' (P17).

Whilst participants in this research did not mention legal action as a means to support NRL players with ongoing injuries, the lawsuit in the United Kingdom (Bower, 2023) launched by 125 former Rugby players against the governing bodies and the failed legal action by former player James McManus (Friedman, 2023) may set a precedent for former players to seek compensation for the consequences of accepting pain and injury as a normal part of being an elite player.

Perceived responsibility for support

Identifying responsibility for providing support is a contested area (Knights et al., 2019). While many participants agreed on the importance of support and preparation for retirement from playing NRL, their allocation of responsibility was shared between the NRL, the club and the individual.

Some participants felt that the NRL had an organisational responsibility to all players past and present either through the League or the Players Association:

The NRL, the system should carry right through a player's career 'til he dies ... what you're used to as a professional player, the professional body should set a system up of medical support, financial support, vocational support, mental health support at that level that you can access regularly (P6).

This was in part based on players' contribution to the game and the place of the sport in society: 'if they're still going to be recognisable figures then you want them to be thriving after football as well' (P13).

Players give so much of themselves physically and through loyalty to the sport and their club, but the game is all about winning and once the player cannot contribute to that they are forgotten. They feel they are 'you're a commodity ... when you're beaten up, broken down, they just roll another one off the line' (P6).

This is not a new finding nor specific to NRL (see Agnew, 2011; Brown et al., 2018; Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Knights et al., 2019). However, the current findings again highlight the need for change in support provided to elite athletes.

Some participants felt a connection with their club and as such felt that the club and its staff had a responsibility to look after their own players by creating a supportive environment.

I think a lot of the support that you receive is set by I guess the culture of the club, the coach and to a degree there's the staff that are important in that area around player development and well-being, career coaching, ... if there's space and its valued at your club then I think that's an area that players are more likely to engage in (P13).

The coach was considered a key stakeholder within the club because without their support it was difficult to consider life beyond playing NRL. These findings support parallel research in Australian Football which found clubs, and especially coaches, have a duty of care towards footballers, particularly during the transition out of sport, and should create a culture of care that provides structure and support to minimise difficulties faced (Agnew & Pill, 2023).

Your coach at most clubs dictates how things go and the different things that are perceived or how they're supported so the coach support is yeah huge ... it allows players to spread their wings if it's supported and encouraged and if it's seen as a barrier or a distraction then it's a bit of a hurdle for players (P13).

However, participants noted that while some coaches may care about a player's future, their priority was to win as their personal success and that of the team depended on it:

Don't get me wrong, you've got your very, very good coaches who genuinely care about you, but then you've got other coaches that just, all they want to do is win because, it's their job on the line (P17).

Whilst sports organisations arguably have some responsibility to assist athletes with their post-sport preparation, athletes are also accountable for their own post-sport opportunities (Agnew & Marks, 2017). Several participants in the current research were adamant on this point.

I don't think it's the game's responsibility ... it's individual responsibilities, everyone's responsible for their own outcomes in life, that's my view so when we say we need more help for people, no we don't, you just need people to go and take some accountabilities for where they are and their own situation (P3).

Many regretted not accepting that responsibility earlier in their careers:

You don't think too much ahead when you're younger and then you get to that to middle stage you, you start thinking about it and you might start, the smarter players might start looking at life after footy ... and then some players wait right till the end and then they're sort of on the back foot (P11).

Support provided to players by the sporting organisation or participating club is key in the retirement transitioning process. As in this study, it has been found across many professional sports that players are well supported when they are contributing to the sport and perceived as a valuable asset, yet once no longer part of the club the player is expected to seek support or resources independently (Agnew et al., 2018; Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Knights et al., 2019).

In keeping with earlier studies (Brown et al., 2018; Mannes et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013) the benefits of support and prioritising preparation for career transitions were acknowledged by participants. Reasons given for not accessing support services available through the NRL/RLPA were stigma, fear of being judged, lack of awareness, non-acceptance of need and lack of encouragement, and promotion at an organisational level.

A big pride thing being an ex-professional footballer I don't want to put it on Facebook that I've got no job ... you know what I mean, people watching you run around on TV and now they, now they're seeing you on Facebook put up for jobs (P11).

As was found by Brown et al. (2018), there is a greater uptake of support where athletes feel endorsed by the support provider and seeking support is encouraged (Knights et al., 2019). It is acknowledged however, that social and structural support (Knights et al., 2019) needs to be offered to athletes during and post their playing career and to meet the expectations and needs of the athletes at the time to ensure a positive transition into retirement from elite sport (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2021). Andrews (2012) argued that one's 'experience of society as a subjective reality is achieved through primary, and to a lesser extent, secondary socialisation' (p. 41). Primary socialisation includes one's identity and position in society (Andrews, 2012). Players are socialised to accept the prioritisation of Rugby League first, which may impact their willingness to seek support for post career planning. The construction of a sports environment by sports administrators and coaches that allows for a holistic, balanced lifestyle can allow space for athletes to prepare for life after sport through the pursuit of outside interests, therefore should be encouraged.

Conclusion and implication for practice

The current study explored experiences of athletes who had retired from the professional sporting arena. While the focus of the study was one sport (NRL) the findings can be generalised within other sporting contexts (Smith, 2018), particularly, but not limited to, male dominated high impact sports. Current accepted practices within Rugby League construct a reality for players that prioritises sport first and subordinates other areas of their lives including retirement preparation. This research suggests that the players are accepting of this culture and therefore contribute to the reinforcement of these ideals despite recognising the challenges this creates at the end of careers when they may be underprepared for retirement. The majority of players in this researched perceived that they had some or full control over the timing of their retirement, yet feelings of loss and the need to reconstruct identity were common

themes for all participants. These findings are of benefit in considering support mechanisms that need to be in place to ensure athletes can retire from elite sport, regardless of the circumstances, with adequate and appropriate resources to enhance the process and experience.

This study adds to the current body of literature, and highlights that for elite athletes, retiring from their sport to life beyond it does not happen as a single point in time; it is an ongoing process and series of transition experiences that require ongoing support and preparation that are entwined in their entire sporting experience, not separated from it. Provision of support and preparation is a shared responsibility of sporting associations, players associations, club administrators and coaches, and the individuals themselves. Therefore, it is recommended that the responsibility for preparation for retirement and wellbeing needs to be top down; NRL to support RLPA and clubs. It is important that support for retiring athletes is not perceived as being solely an RLPA 'problem', it needs to be a whole of sport commitment. This study shows that despite support mechanisms being available and in place for many years (in NRL and other sports), participants were hesitant to access support or were unaware of the scope of services available to them. For players to accept the need for preparation for their future beyond sport, it will be necessary to work to remove the stigma of asking for support, create awareness of options, and incorporate programs into standard practice with recognition of their value alongside skills and playing success. Whilst this is currently the role of the RLPA, perhaps Australian organisations can learn from other countries such as the United Kingdom who has an official charity to assist in this area (Rugby League Cares, 2025). It is anticipated and recommended that the results of this study will support and enhance future programs provided by professional sporting associations offering appropriate resources for players as they manage their personal and professional playing careers, balance playing careers with life outside of elite sport and in preparation to transition out of elite sport and into the next stage of their lives and beyond, adopting a proactive approach rather than a reactive approach which extends the duty of care provided to professional athletes beyond the life of their playing career. For example, the preparation for retirement needs to be ongoing but start early in the players' career and could potentially be incorporated into their training schedule or routine. Preparation for retirement needs to be more than a 'tick box' situation where courses and advice are offered to players who sit through it because they have to, not because they are meaningful. Furthermore, given their crucial role in the development of players, coaches and other staff should be offered educational training and support so that preparation for retirement becomes part of coaching practice and club culture. Given the hesitance of players to ask for support when transitioning out of sport an exit program that concentrates on subsequent career options, transferrable skills, finances and overall mental health and wellbeing needs to be offered by elite sports organisations. Just as many athletes participate in a transition into elite sport program, there is a need for athletes to have a mandatory transition out of sport program so that the responsibility to ask for help is not reliant on the players.

The current study focused on needs and experiences of retired NRL players. Although not explored in this study, there are many other stakeholders that support player transition. Future research is warranted to explore the complexities of

transitioning to retirement from the perspectives of the many significant others involved in the process. While there is existing literature on retirement from sport, the various stages of transition across a sporting career lifespan have not been considered in depth. Future studies could involve communication with elite athletes in the early stages of their playing career to investigate how they interpret the need for support and preparation before the need arises, and how a greater awareness of the need could be instigated.

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